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ABSTRACT

The number of secondary alternative programs in the school district of Philadelphia has grown to 75 giving it one of the largest networks of alternative programs in the country. The object of this paper is to report on the impact of those programs. The programs are divided into four categories: (1) disruptive/ truant programs, (2) career programs, (3) individualized programs, and (4) programs that did not fit into any specified category but offered some alternative to the traditional school. This discussion focuses on what the programs offered students, the problems encountered, and recommendations for improvement. The second part of the paper reports the results of a massive data collection effort which includes data concerning attendance, behavior, and California Achievement Test (CAT) results. CAT comparisons included an analysis of differences between students who remained in an alternative program for two years and those who remained for one year, and an analysis of differences between the traditional (home) schools and their alternative programs. Results indicate that alternative program students are maintaining rates of achievement that are at least comparable with the rates of students in their home schools. (Author/AM)

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IMPACT OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS ON AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Introduction

The number of alternative programs in school systems in this country has grown enormously since the late sixties. The School District of Philadelphia is no exception. From a few alternatives in 1969, the number of secondary alternative programs has grown to 75 giving Philadelphia one of the largest networks of alternative programs in the country. The object of this paper is to report on the impact of those programs. The first part of the paper explores alternative programs in Philadelphia. The programs were divided into four categories (1) Disruptive/truant programs, (2) Career programs, (3) Individualized programs, and (4) General (programs that did not fit into any specific category, but offered some alternative to the traditional school). The paper focuses on what these programs offered students, problems encountered, and recommendations for improvement. The second part of the paper reports the results of a massive data collection effort, data concerning attendance, behavior, and California Achievement Tests (CAT) results were examined. CAT comparisons included an analysis of differences between students who remained in an alternative program for two years and those in an alternative program for one year and an analysis of differences between the traditional (home) schools and their alternative programs.

Alternative programs were established to provide alternative modes of education for children whose needs were not being met through the regular educational offerings. These were the children whom the system could not reach. Many of them failed repeatedly or were underachievers, others left the system before graduating. Yet others "dropped out" by cutting classes and failing to attend school. At the other end of the spectrum were students with exceptional ability who could benefit from additional challenges beyond the regular curriculum. To encourage the development of these programs, the

Office of Alternative Programs was established. All programs were administered, centrally, through the Alternative Programs Office, which was also responsible for funding and facilitating these programs. During the 1975-1977 school years, 75 alternative programs served approximately 6,500 secondary students. This paper will concern itself with the programs funded by the Alternative Program's Office; although some other "alternatives" exist in the Philadelphia School system.

Alternative programs may be defined in a variety of ways. In Philadelphia, the following characteristics represent the important facets of alternative programs:

a) the program is a self-contained unit operated by the staff with much autonomy. The average program served 95 students and had a student to teacher ratio of 21 to 1 and a student to teacher/aide ratio of 14 to 1,

b) student assignment to programs by the usage of referrals, lotterys, and/or volunteers,

c) the use of paraprofessionals,

d) curricular and/or instructional innovation,

e) field experiences and career development, and,

g) a flexible environment.

Procedures

The data collection processes used in this study were established because of evaluation needs, which often changed from year to year. Therefore, individual data were compared to the previous years work, but were not tracked over a three or four year period. Emphasis was placed on gathering data on individual programs and all alternatives in general.

The information reported in the first part of the paper is based on a two-year evaluation conducted by the authors on 16 programs. Intensive program observation and staff and student interviews were the principal methods for collecting information.

The data reported in the second part of the paper was collected through the Alternative Programs Student Record Form which is distributed to all alternative programs (except for those few for whom the data were not applicable) each year. The information utilized to complete this form included attendance and student behavior for all individuals enrolled in the programs.

The task of completing the Alternative Programs Student Record Form was, in some cases, an arduous one. The necessity of gathering information on student performance during the previous school year was somewhat time consuming. As a result, a few of the programs failed to provide information, or provided incomplete information, for certain of the areas. Achievement information was obtained through the city-wide testing program which administers the CAT to all students each year. Only students who took two consecutive administrations of the test were included in the achievement analysis. Complete information was available for approximately 80% of the secondary students concerning behavior and attendance data and approximately 50% of the students concerning CAT data.

Two separate data collection efforts were reported in this paper. The first analysis compared 1974-1975 and 1975-1976 school year data. The second compared 1975-1976 and 1976-1977 school year data. This was done because turnover from year to year in alternative programs ranges from 50

to 60%. In addition, as previously mentioned the data collection processes were designed to gather group data, rather than track individuals over a period of years. The number of students involved in each analysis was as follows.

1) 1974-75 to 1975-76 - total alternative program population - 6520*

   1974-75 to 1975-76 Student Record Form - 5,455 students

   1974-75 to 1975-76 CAT - 3,275 students.

2) 1975-76 to 1976-77 - total alternative program population - 6057*

   1975-76 to 1976-77 Student Record Form - 4,562 students

   1975-76 to 1976-77 CAT - 2,995 students.

* Data from the Parkway Program as well as some other large alternatives were not included in the data analysis primarily because they were not administered by the Alternative Programs office. However, they were were also disproportionate in size (Parkway - 1,100 students) in comparison to the other programs.

Disruptive/Truant Programs

Approximately one-third of the school districts' alternative programs were listed as disruptive/truant programs. The students who attended these programs felt alienated from their home school, and frequently frustrated by a curriculum above their functioning grade level. The result was a student bored with school in an environment too large to give him (her) the attention needed. For this reason, the disruptive/truant alternative programs were established. These programs were almost always located off-site with small student to staff ratios. Students were volunteers or were referred from principals or counselors. The programs offered students the basic core courses, individualized or small group instruction, a curriculum designed to meet their achievement needs, and a staff interested in working with this type of student.

The programs' strongest point was difficult to identify (flexibility was a key asset for all alternatives). The curriculum was designed to meet the needs of the student population. Some students were observed working with second and third grade materials, while others were learning algebra. It was important that the students work with materials that would not frustrate them. The small class size allowed individualized or small group instruction to work effectively as students received the attention they needed. The off-site location was also helpful. It allowed students the opportunity to break away from negative peer influences in the home school. Finally, the program staff offered their students a flexible environment as well as more control over what they learned. One program staff made up a list of courses they could teach.

Students then voted to select from among them.

Overall, these programs are working well. In all the disruptive/truant programs observed, not one was seen having severe behavior problems. In fact, most programs have a quiet and orderly environment, although, getting these students to work requires more time and patience than usual. The students are attending and working at their own pace. One last advantage: taking these students out of their home school environment, where they were encountering problems, makes it a little easier for the home school classes to function.

Disruptive/truant programs also have certain disadvantages. They often have an unnecessary stigma about them (e.g., a program for dumb students). They can become a "dumping ground" for principals or counselors who wish to get certain students out of their school. This can break down the effectiveness of a program, because the staff cannot deal with too many very disruptive students.

Recommendations for improving these programs include the following:

(1) Allow the program staff to make a presentation to the staff and student body of the home school. They could explain what they do and how they serve the school and its students, and

(2) Set up a screening program which would allow the program staff an opportunity to interview incoming students before they enter the program.

Alternative career programs can be divided into two categories. One type actually trained students for specific vocations, while the other group was designed to make students aware of a variety of careers. The majority of the career alternatives fell into the latter group. These programs may be categorized as work-study programs, since students divide their time between the classroom and their work experiences. The work experience component involved from one-fifth to one-half of the students' time. The program coordinator was in-charge of setting up the work experiences which could involve a variety of settings (e.g., schools, hospitals, and public service). The student was responsible for getting to the site and performing any required tasks, although observation was a primary method of learning for most students.

The alternatives that actually trained students for specific vocations had excellent training facilities which could be taken advantage of only by small groups. These students spent half their school day at their work experience, the training was always "hands on", and the students were well supervised. In one program, students worked in a hospital, learning careers in the allied health fields. Several of the students were hired by the hospital after graduation, while others went on to college to specialize in the fields they had been learning.

Instructionally, the programs whose students work experience were all similar tried to integrate the course work with the students off-site work experience. The other programs concentrated upon basic skills instruction.

One of the major disadvantages of career programs is the number of programs allowable in any community. The extensive interest in this area

tends to saturate the community, minimizing the number of appropriate work experiences available. Students are sometimes found stacking boxes or just putting in time with little or no structure for their jobs.

Another disadvantage stems from excessive freedom. If the student is not capable of dealing with this, the responsibilities of their jobs may be abused. Finally, the limited amount of class time may affect the achievement of some students.

It is recommended that all career programs set up active monitoring systems, and that the coordinators of such programs limit the number of students involved when appropriate work experiences are unavailable. It is also recommended that career programs, in general, limit the number of hours spent in work experiences. Generally, the objective of these programs is to make students aware of careers, not train them. This would also allow more students to participate in these programs.

Individualized Programs

Alternative programs which stressed individualized instruction varied greatly in size. The largest program was a school within a school with a population of 600 students (total school population 3,000). The smallest was a self-contained classroom involving 15 students.

The two methods most often observed involved the use of learning packets and learning centers. Learning packets were usually of a commercial nature, covering the appropriate materials of a specific course. Students were allowed to move at their own pace and concentration could be placed upon learning, rather than completing a certain amount of material. The teacher was also free to serve as a resource person, helping students who lagged behind or giving appropriate group lectures. Grades tended to be based on individual progress instead of group comparisons.

Learning centers are similar in concept, except that the teacher developed all of the lessons. The Learning Center approach allowed a subject to be divided into many small areas. For example, in one course there were poetry, drama, grammar, and news centers. Students then worked individually, at their own pace, in the Learning Center areas of their choice. All students also worked on a contract basis. This process allowed students a larger degree of control over the grades they received because they could do more assignments if they wanted a higher grade.

The disadvantages of the learning packets stem from the fact that they are standardized and may not meet the needs or interests of an entire class. Especially with students who are low achieving and easily frustrated. In addition, students find the packets much more difficult to use in the subject areas of math and science.

The major disadvantage of learning centers stems from the enormous amount of work required by each teacher. New materials are constantly needed during the first year or two of its development. Classroom observations indicate that the great amount of work tends to frustrate the teacher and makes a return to the traditional approach appear more desirable.

No recommendations for improvement are offered in this area except that one should understand the advantages and disadvantages of both methods. Perhaps combining them with a traditional approach, as was often observed, will provide a more viable option.

General Alternatives

The programs listed as general alternative programs did not fit into a specific category, but offered some alternative to the traditional school. All were small programs involving one or two classes. The programs may have offered self-contained classrooms, career development, individualized instruction, or some other alternative. The programs were on-site and usually represented an attempt by a few faculty members to offer students a learning environment which might better meet their needs. These programs were encouraged by the School District's Office of Alternative Programs, which allotted money to the programs' home school; usually to support the salary of a teacher or aide.

These programs were usually self-contained, flexible, and easily changed. This was both a strength and a weakness. A strength, because class activities were easier to arrange and curricular innovations easier to implement than a class that interfaced with the school's roster. A weakness, because these programs are sometimes changed too often. One program changed from a disruptive program to one serving talented students to one serving a heterogeneous group. In addition, the program was expanded in size twice. This all occurred during a three year period.

Data Collection Results

Attendance

Students in the secondary alternative programs had an average daily attendance rate of 86 percent during the 1975-76 school year and 85 percent during the 1976-77 school year. In comparison, the average daily attendance rate for the secondary home schools was 77 percent for both years. The difference of 8 to 9 percent indicates attendance at alternative schools was superior to that of the home school. More importantly, it indicates alternative programs were providing an environment which met the needs of their students.

Behavior

Information concerning behavior was obtained by comparing the number of discipline referrals obtained by students from year to year. During the 1975-76 school year 21 percent of the students had improved behavior, while 8% had more behavior problems. Approximately the same figures were found during the 1976-1977 school year. During that year 20.6 percent showed improved behavior, while 7.8% had more behavior problems.

The lack of behavioral problems in the alternative programs were supported by the evaluators observations. None of the programs evaluated were observed having severe problems. Most maintained a quiet atmosphere. This also reflects the positive effect alternative programs have upon students who were not satisfied with the offerings of the traditional schools.

Comparable California Achievement Tests reading data were available for 3,275 secondary students. Of this group, 35 percent had been in an alternative program during the 1974-75 and the 1975-76 school years, 61 percent were in an alternative program only during 1975-76, and 4 percent had no program information.

Of the students who were in an alternative program only for the 1975-76 school year, 58 percent had lower NPRs, while 42 percent maintained or improved their NPRs. Of the students who were in alternative programs for two years, 51 percent had lower National Percentile Ranks (NPRs), while 49 percent maintained or improved their NPRs. (See Table 1).

It is important to note that only students who were in an alternative program for two years were in an alternative program for the entire period of time between test administrations (February, 1975 to February, 1976). Those who were in an alternative program for one year were in non-alternative setting for half of the time between test administrations. In both reading and mathematics, students who were in an alternative program for two years performed better than those who were in an alternative program for one year.

Comparisons between the performance of the alternative programs and their home schools indicated that three percent more of the students in the home school maintained or improved their NPRs. However, when this comparison was limited to the performance of students who were in an alternative program for two years, the results indicated that two percent more alternative program students than home school students maintained or improved their NPRs.

Comparable CAT mathematics results were available for 1,014 students (63% of the students who were administered the mathematics subtests of the CAT). Of this group, 43 percent had been in an alternative program in both the 1974-75 and 1975-76 school years, 55 percent were in an

alternative program only in 1975-76, and 2 percent had no program information reported.

Of the students who were in an alternative program only in 1975-76, 49 percent had lower NPRs, while 51 percent maintained or improved their NPRs. Of the students who were in an alternative program for two years, 46 percent had lower NPRs, while 54 percent maintained or improved their NPRs. Of all alternative program students on whom there were data, 48 percent had lower NPRs, while 52 percent maintained or improved their NPRs.

A comparison between the performance of alternative programs in mathematics and their home schools showed that 52 percent of the alternative program students and 47 percent of the home school students maintained or improved their NPRs.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Students Maintaining or Improving Their National Percentile Ranks

A Comparison Between the 1974-75 and 1975-76 School Years

	All Alternative Program Students	Students from the Alternative Programs Home School	Alternative Program Students who were in the Program for 2 Years	Alternative Program Students in the Program for One Year
CAT READING	44	47	49	42
CAT MATHEMATICS	52	47	54	51

The second achievement analysis involved students who were in an alternative program during the 1975-76 and 1976-77 school years. Comparable CAT reading, data were available for 2,995 students. (see Table 2). Of this group, 42 percent had been in an alternative during the 1975-76 and 1976-77 school years, 52 percent were in an alternative program only during 1976-77, and 6 percent had no program information. Achievement results indicated 49 percent improved or maintained their national percentile ranks, while 51 percent did not maintain their NPRs. Differences between students in an alternative program for one year and those in the program for two years were minimal (1%) concerning reading achievement.

Comparable CAT math data were available for 855 students. Of this group 45 percent had been in an alternative program for two years, while 55 percent were in for only one year. For students in an alternative for two years, 59 percent maintained or improved their NPRs, while 41 percent did not. Of students in an alternative for only one year 53 percent maintained or improved their NPRS, while 47 percent did not.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Students Maintaining
or Improving Their National Percentile Ranks
A Comparison Between the 1975-76 and 1976-77 School Years

	All Alternative Program Students	Students In An Alternative Program for One Year	Students in An Alternative Program for Two Years
CAT READING	49	48	49
CAT MATHEMATICS	55	53	59

This collection of data over a three year period indicates alternative program students were maintaining rates of achievement that were at least comparable with the rates of students in their home school. This is an important point, since critics of alternative education believe alternatives do not prepare students academically as well as the traditional schools. The data comparing students in an alternative program one year versus two years indicated that students in an alternative for two years did slightly better, however, substantial differences in terms of the actual number of students improving were not found.

Conclusion

Alternative programs were designed for specific groups of students and they are meeting the needs of those students. This is supported by observations of alternative programs as well as by the high attendance rates and good behavior maintained by alternative program students. In the area of achievement, results show students in alternative programs are improving at least at the same rate as those students in the traditional school. This is an important point, too often the success of a more expensive program is evaluated in terms of achievement results. If achievement test results do not move upward at a greater rate than the traditional school, then why have the program? The reason, alternatives provide many benefits that cannot be measured. The instructional method that helps all students grow at enormous rates has not and may never be developed, nor have testing procedures that (we are confident) accurately measure this growth. However, alternative methods do help students by offering them options they could not obtain in the traditional schools. Students can learn about various careers through their own observations and by "hands on" experiences. Students with behavior problems can start again in a new and smaller school environment where attention needs can be met. Students who have lagged behind academically can work with materials at their own level instead of being frustrated by trying to keep up with their peers. These are the differences that make alternative programs valuable, however, the fact that alternatives help students maintain rates of achievement comparable to those of students in the traditional schools makes them all the more valuable.

In a system the size (267,000 pupils) and complexity of the School District of Philadelphia, it is probably impossible to satisfy the needs of all children. Alternative programs provide a way of helping many of those students who are missed by the mainstream.